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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

RIN 0648-XE341

Taking and Importing Marine Mammals; Taking Marine Mammals Incidental to Fisheries Research

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Notice; receipt of application for Letters of Authorization; request for comments and information.

SUMMARY: NMFS' Office of Protected Resources has received a request from the NMFS Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center (PIFSC) for authorization to take small numbers of marine mammals incidental to conducting fisheries research, over the course of five years from the date of issuance. Pursuant to regulations implementing the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), NMFS is announcing receipt of the PIFSC's request for the development and implementation of regulations governing the incidental taking of marine mammals. NMFS invites the public to provide information, suggestions, and comments on the PIFSC's application and request.

DATES: Comments and information must be received no later than *[insert date 30 days after date of publication in the FEDERAL REGISTER]*.

ADDRESSES: Comments on the applications should be addressed to Jolie Harrison, Chief, Permits and Conservation Division, Office of Protected Resources, National Marine Fisheries

Service. Physical comments should be sent to 1315 East-West Highway, Silver Spring, MD 20910 and electronic comments should be sent to *ITP.Laws@noaa.gov*.

Instructions: NMFS is not responsible for comments sent by any other method, to any other address or individual, or received after the end of the comment period. Comments received electronically, including all attachments, must not exceed a 25-megabyte file size. Attachments to electronic comments will be accepted in Microsoft Word or Excel or Adobe PDF file formats only. All comments received are a part of the public record and will generally be posted to the Internet at *www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/permits/incidental/research.htm* without change. All personal identifying information (e.g., name, address) voluntarily submitted by the commenter may be publicly accessible. Do not submit confidential business information or otherwise sensitive or protected information.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Ben Laws, Office of Protected Resources, NMFS, (301) 427-8401.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Availability

An electronic copy of the PIFSC's application may be obtained by visiting the Internet at: *www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/permits/incidental/research.htm*. The PIFSC is concurrently releasing a draft Environmental Assessment, prepared pursuant to requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act, for the conduct of their fisheries research. A copy of the draft EA, which would also support our proposed rulemaking under the MMPA, is available at the same website.

Background

Section 101(a)(5)(A) of the MMPA (16 U.S.C. 1361 *et seq.*) directs the Secretary of Commerce (Secretary) to allow, upon request, the incidental, but not intentional, taking of small numbers of marine mammals by U.S. citizens who engage in a specified activity (other than commercial fishing) if certain findings are made and regulations are issued.

Incidental taking shall be allowed if NMFS finds that the taking will have a negligible impact on the species or stock(s) affected and will not have an unmitigable adverse impact on the availability of the species or stock(s) for taking for subsistence uses, and if the permissible methods of taking and requirements pertaining to the mitigation, monitoring and reporting of such taking are set forth.

NMFS has defined “negligible impact” in 50 CFR 216.103 as “an impact resulting from the specified activity that cannot be reasonably expected to, and is not reasonably likely to, adversely affect the species or stock through effects on annual rates of recruitment or survival.”

Except with respect to certain activities not pertinent here, the MMPA defines “harassment” as: “any act of pursuit, torment, or annoyance which (i) has the potential to injure a marine mammal or marine mammal stock in the wild [Level A harassment]; or (ii) has the potential to disturb a marine mammal or marine mammal stock in the wild by causing disruption of behavioral patterns, including, but not limited to, migration, breathing, nursing, breeding, feeding, or sheltering [Level B harassment].”

Summary of Request

On November 30, 2015, NMFS received an adequate and complete application from the PIFSC requesting authorization for take of marine mammals incidental to fisheries research conducted by the PIFSC. The requested regulations would be valid for five years from the date of issuance. The PIFSC plans to conduct fisheries research surveys in multiple geographic

regions within the Pacific Ocean, including Hawaii, Samoa, the Marianas, and the western and central Pacific broadly (including the Pacific Remote Island Area). It is possible that marine mammals may interact with fishing gear (*e.g.*, trawls nets, longlines) used in PIFSC's fisheries research projects, resulting in injury, serious injury, or mortality. In addition, the PIFSC operates active acoustic devices that have the potential to disturb marine mammals. Because the specified activities have the potential to take marine mammals present within these action areas, the PIFSC requests authorization to take multiple species of marine mammal that may occur in these areas.

Specified Activities

The Federal Government has a responsibility to conserve and protect living marine resources in U.S. federal waters and has also entered into a number of international agreements and treaties related to the management of living marine resources in international waters outside the United States. NOAA has the primary responsibility for managing marine fin and shellfish species and their habitats, with that responsibility delegated within NOAA to NMFS.

In order to direct and coordinate the collection of scientific information needed to make informed management decisions, Congress created six Regional Fisheries Science Centers, each a distinct organizational entity and the scientific focal point within NMFS for region-based federal fisheries-related research. This research is aimed at monitoring fish stock recruitment, abundance, survival and biological rates, geographic distribution of species and stocks, ecosystem process changes, and marine ecological research. The PIFSC is the research arm of NMFS in the Pacific Islands.

Research is aimed at monitoring fish stock recruitment, survival and biological rates, abundance and geographic distribution of species and stocks, and providing other scientific

information needed to improve our understanding of complex marine ecological processes. The PIFSC proposes to administer and conduct these survey programs over the five-year period.

Information Solicited

Interested persons may submit information, suggestions, and comments concerning the PIFSC's request (see **ADDRESSES**). NMFS will consider all information, suggestions, and comments related to the request during the development of proposed regulations governing the incidental taking of marine mammals by the PIFSC, if appropriate.

Dated: December 2, 2015.

Donna S. Wieting,
Director,
Office of Protected Resources,
National Marine Fisheries Service.

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